

WHO NEEDS A CHURCH?

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**JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Psalm 104:24-34

Acts 2:1-13

**“All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another,
‘What does this mean?’” (Acts 2:12) NRSV**

God hates walls and divisions and intends to save the world by breaking them down. If we want to stay close to God, we need to participate in this barrier breaking project, not frustrate it. Churches, for all their awful mistakes, have a unique power to do that.

The community of God has no barriers to membership, not even sin.

Christ died for us while we were yet sinners.

He didn't wait until we got over it. . . .

When the church lives up to its charter, nothing divides its members. . . .

People who wouldn't come together for any other reason, who don't share nationality, race, opinions, who don't even like each other, can draw close to each other here, because God chose all of them.

Barbara G. Wheeler
Who Needs the Church?

Groucho Marx commented once that he really wasn't interested in joining an organization that accepted people like him into membership. He wasn't referring to the church of Jesus Christ but he might well have been.

Anne Lamott makes the same point. Someone told me recently that if I continued quoting Anne Lamott she wasn't going to buy the book because she would have heard the whole thing on Sunday morning. I looked it up, and I haven't quoted her for at least seven weeks, and on the subject of the church, Lamott is priceless. After decades away from the church and a difficult, troubled life on the verge of disaster, she found her way to a small diverse congregation in Marin City, California, St. Andrew Presbyterian Church. She loves her church, participates, teaches Sunday school, and, on one occasion, was asked to preach the sermon. Typically, she chose for her text the story of Rahab in the second chapter of the Book of Joshua. You don't hear much about Rahab in church because she was a prostitute, “one of the bad girls of the Old Testament,” Lamott calls her. The story happens

at the end of the Israelites' wilderness journey. They have arrived at Jericho; Joshua is the leader. The Israelite army camps across the Jordan River. Joshua sends two spies into the city and they somehow end up at Rahab's place. That could make for a whole other narrative. But what happens is that, lo and behold, agents for the King also show up at Rahab's busy establishment. They see the Jewish spies and hurry back to headquarters to report the presence of enemy agents. The King dispatches a party to raid Rahab's and arrest the men. But Rahab lies to the King's soldiers, saves the spies, and helps them escape, and the story of God's people continues. The Israelite army fights and wins the battle of Jericho during which those walls came tumbling down.

Anne Lamott comments:

"You've got to love this in a God--consistently assembling the motleyist to bring into this lonely and frightening world, a commitment to caring and community. It's a centuries-long reality show--Moses the stutterer, Rahab the hooker, David the adulterer, Mary the homeless teenager. Not to mention all the mealy-mouthed disciples. Not to mention a raging insecure narcissist like me." (*Plan B, Further Thoughts on Faith*, p. 22)

The people of God, the Church--what an amazing, peculiar phenomenon!

We call this day, Pentecost Sunday, the birthday of the church. The disciples and followers of Jesus weren't sure what, if anything, they were supposed to be doing. It was weeks after the crucifixion and the reports and experiences of the resurrection. The disciples were still in Jerusalem waiting for something to happen before they gave up and went back to their homes and their lives that they had left to follow Jesus three years earlier. On the day of Pentecost something happened.

Pentecost is a Jewish feast day. Apparently the followers of Jesus were all together in a public place when strange things started to happen, inexplicable, mysterious, unexplainable things. Luke, who is the writer of the account, uses powerful images--the rush of a violent wind, tongues of fire. They began to speak in other languages. Whatever was going on, they became convinced, in retrospect, that it was the Spirit of God, the spirit of the Risen Jesus Christ; the same wind that blew over the water and the chaos in the creation story; the same wind that is the breath of God, animating, enlivening, creating all life.

Whatever it was, other people, pilgrims from all over the world, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Libyans, Romans, observed it and wondered about the speaking which they could understand in their own languages. Whatever it was, the crowd was amazed and perplexed,

although the urbane sophisticates dismissed it as a case of rowdy drunks who had too much wine too early in the day.

Whatever happened that day, it was the occasion when the followers of Jesus were convinced and inspired to speak openly and publicly, to emerge from their hiding place and go into the world with the news that in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, Almighty God had come into human history. Pentecost is the day the theological abstraction became a concrete reality, the day when interested followers were compelled to live the new life of love and compassion and justice and service which Jesus himself taught and modeled, to live it openly in the world, and to die for it if need be. Pentecost is the day the church was born. And the miracle of Pentecost is not the mysterious signs, the wind and tongues of fire. The miracle is, pure and simple, the existence, from that day to this day, of the peculiar, wonderful, exasperating, inspiring human institution called "church."

The existence of the church, the relationship of the church to the world, is a topic of continuing and intense interest, both to those of us on the inside and those who are on the outside scratching their heads wondering what all the fuss is about, in much the same way as those perplexed bystanders in Jerusalem. The Church has been on the front page. The media could not resist and the whole world was fascinated as Pope John Paul II died, his life celebrated and commended to God in ancient, stately colorful ritual, and as Cardinal electors gathered from around the world to meet in the Sistine Chapel and elect a new Pope.

It was fortunate coincidence that we were in Rome at the time and had the privilege of a meeting with a friend and staff member of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the Vatican Ecumenical office, the day before the Pope died. We were in St. Peter's square that day and again that evening to see the crowds gathering. There were people from Poland waving the Polish flag, nuns from Africa holding candles and praying, young people from South America sitting in a circle singing accompanied by a guitar, and the media, television crews with bright lights, satellite dishes, camera technicians and somber reporters, speaking in hundreds of languages against the backdrop of the Basilica of St. Peter and the Papal apartments. The crowds, the music, the praying, the voices speaking different languages--the image that came to mind was Pentecost and the mysterious creative energy of God we call the Holy Spirit. While I loved what I was seeing, I am enough of a Protestant to at the same time be grateful that the Holy Spirit also stirred up reformers who came up with an alternative way of thinking about the institution of the church.

That entity, of which we are a part this morning, the Mainline Protestant Church in the United States of American, is the subject of intense scrutiny and analysis and no little conflict these days. In fact there is no more

critical topic before the American people than the relationship of religion and religious values to the culture and its political institution and processes. Important issues are being debated in terms of religious values and without any real consensus about the nature of those values.

In the meantime, the mainline Protestant Churches--Episcopalian, Methodist, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Disciples, American Baptist--find themselves in a new and greatly diminished position in American culture. We used to "run the show" as historian Martin Marty put it in a new book, *The Protestant Voice in American Pluralism*. The Colonial "big three," Puritan Congregationalists in New England, Presbyterians in the Middle Colonies, Episcopalians in the South, dominated. Marty points out that at the end of the colonial period there was not a single Roman Catholic Church in all of New England. The 30,000 Catholics in the population were all in Maryland and Southern Pennsylvania. There were only 3,000 Jews in the colonial population and most Protestants never saw one. Nine of the thirteen colonies had established Protestant Churches, supported by state governments and able to exercise real control. In Massachusetts, for instance, crews of trading vessels anchored in the Bay were not allowed to come ashore and mix with the Puritan population. Newport welcomed them.

Protestantism dominated American culture and in many ways controlled and managed things until America itself changed. Immigrants from around the world arrived with their own brands of Christianity; Roman Catholics arrived from Ireland, Germany, Italy by the millions. And finally, in 1965, immigration laws that favored white Protestants were changed and people with religions other than Christianity began to arrive and make their presence felt--Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs.

The world has never seen anything quite like it, and, in the process, what we still call mainline Protestantism is in a new and unfamiliar place. Some call it sidelined. Others use the term "exiled." The dramatic cultural change has spawned a reaction from evangelical Christian churches and organizations that want to "take back America," which means to superimpose, not just Christian values, about which there is lively disagreement, but evangelical values on a culture that has changed vastly. Marty calls it the politics of nostalgia and resentment. He also wants mainline Protestants to acknowledge and celebrate the fact that we--and our emphasis on justice and equality and tolerance--are at least partly responsible for America's amazing diversity.

But things have changed. Good friend Barbara Wheeler, President of Auburn Theological Seminary, is a student of the church in American culture. Barbara says we have crossed a divide. Before, if you didn't hold

traditional religious beliefs and belong to a church you felt obliged to explain yourself. Now the pressure is to explain why you do.

Wheeler says that when she travels she reads the personal ads in local newspapers and has discovered that “more and more among the undesirable characteristics in a person being sought is organized religion. It’s not as bad a smoking but in some parts of the country, it’s close.” (*Who Needs the Church?*)

Peter Gomes tells the wonderful story of the parents of a Harvard student who made an appointment with him to discuss a problem they were having with their daughter. “And what might the problem be?” Gomes asked. The anxious, worried parents answered somberly: “She’s become a Christian and she goes to church on Sunday.”

Now there is literally a multitude of people trying to figure out what happened and what to do about it. And there is no small amount of blaming. Conservative evangelical Presbyterians are convinced that liberal, progressive Presbyterians are at fault. My conclusion is that nobody’s at fault. The world that we once dominated has changed. And we are called by God, I deeply believe, not to resist and resent and try to recapture an era that is over, but to prayerfully and creatively discern what God has in mind for us now.

For the record, Marty and Wheeler both suggest that one of the cultural changes is the emergence of a radical individualism. It is also one of the reasons the world needs the church. People go it alone. They *Bowl Alone* and they seek for God alone and practice their religion alone. The evidence is compelling. One hundred years ago if you were born a Presbyterian, chances are you remained a Presbyterian and had a lot of children who became Presbyterian. That doesn’t happen any longer. Denomination loyalty is gone. And baptized Presbyterians are inclined to drop out altogether and practice America’s favorite religion, private, personal spirituality. “I’m a very spiritual person,” people tell me, “but I don’t go to church.” Sociologist Robert Bellah calls it “Sheliaism,” based on a now famous interviewee who said, “I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheliaism, just my own little voice.”

Marty and Wheeler join their voices with generations of scholars who understand that Christian faith does not exist apart from community, that part of what is happening in the pages of the Bible, from beginning to end, is the creation, by God, of a people, a community. Hebrew scripture, which we share with our Jewish neighbors, is the story of God creating, calling and nurturing, loving a people. Jesus called his disciples into a deeper fellowship, a deeper friendship, with himself and with one another. He told

them that loving God and loving one another, loving the neighbor in need, is the one moral imperative. And on Pentecost, the Spirit of God animated and energized a group of frightened individuals and made them into a new community, the church.

The sociologists and psychologists know that there is a down side to individualism; that human beings don't thrive on their own, that there is something terribly important, something critical about community, that basic human needs are met in community.

You can get away with a one-on-one, personal relationship with God, just God and me and no messy institution to complicate things, as long as things are going well, Barbara Wheeler says. But when trouble comes and sadness, "none of us is strong enough . . . at the bad times, when it feels as if God does not care about our pain. . . . In moments like these, when God is far away and when our faith is weak or non-existent--in moments like these we need the church, all those other lovers of God, who, in tough times keep the faith for me."

Those of us privileged to live and work inside this amazing, exasperating, wonderful institution, know, because we have witnessed it, the saving, redeeming power of the community, the church. Not every minute, but enough times over the years to know that one of God's most precious gifts to us is the church.

I'm occasionally asked to speak to seminary and divinity school students about the church, about which they are quizzical and skeptical, as they ought to be. I did it twice last week. It's always a little frustrating because while I can explain the mechanics and the techniques, I can't find the words, and they haven't been around long enough to have experienced the church when it is authentically living out in the world the saving love of God in its Lord Jesus Christ. I simply don't have words, and maybe nobody does, to tell about the church, the church at the edges and at the critical and joyful and tragic times of human life---at births and baptisms, at weddings, and confirmations. I can never quite find words to describe what a church is when one of the community is sick and alone and care teams from the church, some of whom know the ill person and love her and some of whom do not know her but know that she is part of the community and in trouble, come into her home and do the dishes and wash bed clothes and put groceries on the shelf. I don't have words to describe how the church gathers around her family as she dies, is with them in the hospital, for the memorial service, and on into the process of grief and healing.

I don't know how to tell these students that I cannot imagine my life without what happens in church at Christmas and on Easter morning, and Ash Wednesday and All Saints Day and Thanksgiving, and how much poorer

I would be without once a week standing with the beloved community to sing "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

Anne Lamott tells one of my favorite stories about a little girl who was lost and a policeman who found her and drove her around looking for her home. The little girl saw something she recognized. "There's my church," she said. "You can leave me out now. I can always find my way home from my church."

And Glen Fennema, a member of this congregation who died seven or eight years ago. I've told his story before but it belongs in this sermon and Glen loved this church so much I don't think he'd mind me telling it again.

Glen had AIDS. He came to church every Sunday as long as he was able. When he knew how sick he was he signed up for a trip to Italy with our Morning Choir, which is how many of us got to know him. Near the end he was in Hospice. I visited. We talked and prayed and I asked him what the most difficult part of this was for him. He said "the hardest part is at night when all the visitors are gone and they turn the lights out and its quiet and I'm alone with my thoughts and what is happening to me. I have trouble falling asleep. You know what I do? I get out my tape player; I put my earphones on, put in a tape of one of our morning worship services--I must have a hundred of them. And I listen to the entire service. Sometimes I fall asleep during your sermon . . . but I'll bet I'm not the only one who does that," he said. "That's how I go to sleep every night. Here in my bed--but also in my church."

Who needs a church? I do. The world does. Most amazing of all, God does.

Amen.